

Warszawa, 10.04.2025

Helena Radzikowska

Akademia Teatralna

im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza

w Warszawie

„Returns” to Auschwitz, exile to „Madagascar”: A Studium and Punctum of Working on Performances Addressing the Memory of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish Identity

Summary of the doctoral dissertation:

The themes of Polish-Jewish relations, memory of the Holocaust, identity, and combating exclusions are close to me and constitute the subject of my interests and research, and thus also my artistic pursuits. In 2021, I created two performances that allowed me to engage creatively with these issues. The experiences gained from working on these productions complement each other not only thematically but also practically. I wanted to present as broad a spectrum of my theatrical practice as possible. I wrote and directed *Powroty* (Returns), and co-produced *Madagaskar* (Madagascar), in which I also created one of the main roles. I was curious how I would manage to analyze these different roles. It turned out that my approach to the creative process is similar regardless of the position I take in it – dramaturg, director, producer, or actress. My personal methodology for creative work is based on an association with the terminology proposed by Roland Barthes in relation to photography. The construction of the concept of both the entire performance and its segment in the form of a role is based on thorough *studium* of historical background, contexts, and biographies. I would call this stage objective. Engagement with the topic, research, and reading cultural texts bring me intriguing insights, which, as Barthes writes, are "punctuations," "pricks," "stings." This is my *punctum* – the essence of what I want to convey through the medium of theatre. Here, universal content is infused with subjective sensitivity. The combination of *studium* and *punctum* allows me to select the appropriate expressive means to be used in the performance.

I divided the dissertation into two parts. In the first part, I discuss my work on the performances. In the case of *Powroty*, which premiered on September 1, 2021, at the Olsztyn Puppet Theatre, I describe in detail the process of constructing the script. The play consists mainly of monologues by women to whom the trauma of the Holocaust has been passed down

through previous generations. I wanted to create a polyphonic statement made up of different perspectives of the speakers. Three actresses in the performance play the daughters and granddaughters of those who experienced the hell of Auschwitz, either as victims or perpetrators. In the course of the discussion, I recall various stages of rehearsals, but I focus particularly on the first, workshop meetings, during which the concept of the performance became clear. I conclude the chapter on *Powroty* with a comparison of the effect of the research conducted with the team to the documentary film *The Commandant's Shadow*, which tells the story of a former Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoner and her daughter meeting with son, and the grandson of Rudolf Höss.

The second chapter of the first part is dedicated to the performance *Madagaskar*, which premiered on November 4, 2021, at the Esther Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theatre in Warsaw. The performance, based on a text by Magdalena Drab and directed by Małgorzata Dębska in her debut, transports the audience to metaphysical afterlife realms, where after death, notable personalities of Polish-Jewish descent were "exiled." At the outset, I describe the production process of the performance by the independent theatre company PAPAHEMA, which I co-founded. I present the stages of the production, starting with the inspiration, securing funds, and the collective creation of the initial concept. Then I trace the changes in the script that were made during the rehearsal process. The author of the play defined the characters as "what's left of them." In my dissertation, I examine what's left of the original version of the script. Then I focus on the biography of Helena Rubinstein, the role I created in the performance. Finally, I refer to the debate accompanying the premiere of the play, titled *Madagascar. The Island of the Excluded*, as it interestingly places the content of the performance in contemporary realities.

The second part of the dissertation consists of three essays that place reflections on both performances in a cultural context. A lot has been said about the Holocaust, the bibliography is vast, and the number of perspectives is immense. I decided to limit my considerations to the categories of place, portrait, and language, which I believe influence the construction of a theatrical performance. I build a *studium* of the issues I have chosen by referring to the works of prominent thinkers of the 20th century who dealt with Holocaust issues, such as Giorgio Agamben, Zygmunt Bauman, Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, Georges Didi-Huberman, Otto Dov Kulka, and to the achievements of representatives of broadly understood humanities, including Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Michel Foucault, Jonathan Littell, Tadeusz Kantor, and Michał Głowiński. In each chapter, I define my *punctum*, based on which I build intellectual constructs.

The first essay is about place. In it, I recall Zionist ideas, the project to create the first Polish colony in Madagascar, the forced deportation of Jews from the Third Reich, which, at

the Wannsee Conference, turned into a plan for the final extermination. From Madagascar, I take my readers to Auschwitz, only to return with them to the exotic island, but now less real, as it is placed in metaphysical afterlife realms.

The second essay is devoted to the portrait. I refer to the reflection present in the humanities on the relationship between photography and death. I describe the procedure for taking photographs documenting prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp and analyze Helena Rubinstein's passion for capturing her own image. In the first case, the sound of the shutter is a sign of a lethal shot, while in the second, it is meant to grant immortality to the model, yet in reality, it reveals the armor behind which she hides her weaknesses.

In the final essay, I discuss the language in which one can (or should?) speak about the Holocaust. I refer to the assertion of the inexpressibility of what happened in Auschwitz. Ultimately, I conclude that the stylistic means best suited for narrating the Holocaust are grotesque and irony. Finally, I recall Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest*, which tells the story of the idyllic life that Rudolf Höss's family led in a villa adjacent to the death factory.

In the conclusion, I point out the significant role of the "great absentees" (people, places, images, words) in the narrative of the Holocaust.